

By Jack Thomas

Earl and Carolyn Good of Lexington have been laughing at "A Prairie Home Companion" every Saturday night on public radio for so many years now that the folks in Lake Wobegon seem more like neighbors than the fabled characters in a mythical Minnesota town dreamed up by Garrison Kellor, writer for The New Yorker and host of the most popular radio program in America.

"A Prairie Home Companion," a two-hour program of music and humor broadcast live every Saturday night from St. Paul, Minn., on more than 200 public radio stations, including WGBH-FM (89.7) in Boston, has made Kellor and his Lake Wobegon characters into an American cult.

Take the Good family from Lexington. As far as they're concerned, Father Emil of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church might stop by any evening, and if you bought Carolyn a piece of rhubarb pie at the Chatterbox Cafe, where the coffee is always on, which is why it tastes that way, why she might tell you a tale or two about Hjalmar Ingqvist, president of the fictitious sponsor, the Powdermilk Biscuit Co., and she might even sing you the Powdermilk Biscuit song — "Heavens, they're tasty. And expeditious."

In March, the Goods decided to throw a Lake Wobegon party for any of their friends who could pass A Prairie Home Companion Entrance Examination. One of the questions: If you live in this town, you buy your groceries at: a. The Buy-Rite; b. Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery Store; c. Sven's Cut-Rate Grub.

More than 100 qualified, and they brought guitars, banjos, good strong voices, Norwegian dishes, Powdermilk Biscuits and enough grog to turn the shyest person into a bellicose Viking.

Well, Garrison Kellor and the Lake Wobegon gang are all coming to the Berklee Performance Center in Boston for five concerts beginning tomorrow night, including a live broadcast Saturday at 6 p.m.

But as everyone predicted at the Sidetrack Tap — "Don't Sleep at Our Bar; We Don't Drink in Your Bed" — the 6000 tickets lasted about as long as a chubby mouse in Bertha's Kitty Boutique.

Boston is the last stop on a spring tour that played to hand-clapping, foot-stomping sellout crowds in New York City and Middlebury, Vt.

To describe the show as a medley of jazz, blues, ethnic and rural American music and folksy monologues is not to do justice to "A Prairie Home Companion."

For one thing, as with radio in the '40s and '50s, the show depends on your imagination. Without a television picture, listeners have to imagine what it feels like to sit behind the steamy windows of the Chatterbox Cafe, and listen to Dorothy take orders from the guys with feedcups on.

The music is eclectic and unlike anything else on radio, a rare blend of jazz, folk, ethnic, regional and old-time mountain music.

The show's regulars are Butch Thompson at the piano and his trio, Bill Evans at slap bass and drummer Red Maddock, who left home during the Taft Administration and later played with the Al Trace Band, which recorded a song Red would prefer to forget, "Mairsy Doats."

The spring tour includes familiar names like Peter Ostrowsko, who plays guitar, fiddle and mandolin, and Stoney Lonsome, a top-notch bluegrass band with Brian Barnes on guitar, Dough Lohman bass, Kate MacKenzie vocal,

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THE 'PRAIRIE' TOUR STOPS HERE



GARRISON KELLOR ARRIVES WITH LAKE WOBEGON'S FAVORITE ROAD SHOW

John Niemann fiddle, Kevin Barnes banjo and Joe Trimbach mandolin.

The Boston concerts will feature the 14-member Klezmer Conservatory Band, playing Yiddish renaissance music, and the New Black Eagle Jazz Band, a traditional Dixieland group that plays every week at the Stickey Wicket in Hopkinton.

Between the musical celebrations,

Kellor plugs sponsors, sings an occasional song, and reads listeners' greetings to one another.

"Hello to Frank in Saint Cloud with love from your unwritten-to family back home in Fort Wayne."

For many, though, the highlight is Kellor's relaxed monologues, delightful dispatches about life back home in Lake Wobegon, the little town that time forgot and that the decades cannot improve.

Kellor delivers gentle parables that joke about small town life without being

condescending, stories about Lake Wobegon and the smell of hives on the front porch in spring, or families that eat at the kitchen table to save the dining room table for company, where people never lock the front door and can barely remember where the key is.

Kellor is undoubtedly the nation's foremost spokesman in behalf of shy people, and has even proposed a monument to The Shy Person.

"It's hard work being a shy person," he says. "It's exhausting work to be shy, very shy, day after day, with all the dodging you have to do, looking around corners trying to make sure somebody's not coming that you have to talk to and anticipating problems like if someone came up and said, 'Hello, how are you,' and kind of rehearsing what you would say in that situation, hanging back in the shadow, walking close to the building, keeping your head down. By the end of the day, you're beat."

Kellor himself is the very model of a shy person.

He rarely makes eye contact. From stage, he looks off toward an anonymous corner, or holds the mike with both hands, and closes his eyes while he recalls life back in his home town of Lake Wobegon.

Take the high school team, the Whippets, who play at the peak of their abilities, and always lose.

"The Whippets lost again Sunday," Kellor reported recently, "the third game in a row to the Upsala Uffers, by a score of 14 to 1."

"A lot of people are down on the Whippets ever since, talking gloomily as though the whole town had lost, but I tell you, that team never loses but what they get something of value out of it. It was a great game last Sunday. I wish you could have seen it... They were playing at the peak of their abilities."

"The baseball team looked good. They were reaching down for the dirt in the batter's box, rubbing it into their hands, knocking the clods of dirt off their spikes, and looking professional."

"They'd check third base for signals from the coach, even though Dutch doesn't coach there anymore. He says it doesn't do any good, and it's true that it's not safe to sit in the stands behind first base because the shortstop is wild now and then, but the throws aren't that hard..."

The monologues, for all their fine tuning, are not memorized.

"I usually will just write a first draft, which for me is about four or five double spaced pages, and I will try to make that draft something that a person could actually stand on a stage and say, but once you get on stage with it, it doesn't always work out that way, so I just find it to be a simple process of editing to write a rough first draft, look at it a couple of times, then go on stage and do something that is more or less based on the draft. It's hard, too, to write for voice. I think playwriting is probably the hardest writing there is."

"I have the advantage of writing strictly for my own voice, but even so, if I got on stage and just read from it, it would be embarrassing."

Do not, by the way, be discouraged if you missed out on tickets for the Berklee show.

You can still hear "A Prairie Home Companion," and as Carolyn Good says, that may be better.

"We weren't able to get tickets," she said. "We have mixed feelings about seeing him live. It's kind of nice to have a radio show without a lot of visuals. The way he spins tales, maybe it's better to leave some of it to the imagination." □